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I've been enmeshed in this "problem" of electronic waste for several years now. So I think it's important to define exactly what the problem is, and what it isn't.

On the one hand, if you listen to the numbers that are thrown around, you'd think we were drowning in a sea of electronic waste. I've heard, for example, that in this country alone 130,000 personal computers are discarded every day. An industry association has estimated that three billion electronic products – TVs, computers, cell phones, etc. – will be scrapped in the United States during the rest of this decade. Considering how fast the electronics industry is growing, and how American consumers are becoming more and more dependent on electronics, it certainly sounds like a tidal wave of waste.

On the other hand, EPA estimates that electronic waste is about 1.5 percent of the municipal solid waste stream in this country, and it's increasing about one tenth of a percent a year. In other words, by the end of the decade electronic waste may still be only two percent of our solid waste stream.

Moreover, if households dispose of these wastes responsibly and safely, they pose little risk to public health. Let me repeat that: electronic waste discarded into legal, well-run landfills pose little threat to public health.

So why all the furor about electronic waste? The media keep churning out stories about the risks posed by uncontrolled recycling operations, particularly in developing countries. Three states have passed laws mandating different kinds of electronic waste management programs. The U.S. Congress is considering new legislation to control electronic waste on a national level. And a lot of people think EPA should play in big role in drafting and implementing that legislation.

I don't agree with that. The management of electronic waste is not a public health problem. It's an economic problem. There's no question that if money needs to be raised to help pay for electronics recycling, the consumer is ultimately going to pay it, one way or another. The question is: how is that money going to be raised, and how is it going to be distributed?

I don't believe that EPA should draft a law imposing a national economic fix. That's the job of the Congress.

If you look at the state laws that have been passed so far, you'll see that the states are grappling with the economic question: who pays how much at what point in the process, and how does the money get to recyclers? I sympathize with the states. They're trying to design programs that will really work, and so they're trying out different ideas. I also sympathize with electronics manufactures and retailers, who don't relish the prospect of having to comply with as many as 50 different state recycling programs. Some of them would like to see a national program, if only because that would be simpler than 50 state programs. The problem is: what would that national program look like?

A couple years ago EPA pulled together a national consortium of electronics manufacturers, retailers, and recyclers to try to develop a national

response to electronic waste management. The group debated a lot of different ideas, and field-tested a few of them, but not much came of it

From that experience EPA learned a number of valuable lessons. For one thing, the electronics industry is not monolithic. It's highly diverse, with manufacturers, retailers, and recyclers having much different ideas about how a national program would work. Even the different manufactures don't see eye to eye on the structure of a national program. In other words, it's not at all clear to us at EPA what an effective, national electronics recycling program would look like. We're happy to share our technical expertise with everyone on Capitol Hill, but we won't be drafting any legislation.

That does not mean that we're sitting on our hands. In fact, we have an energetic, but voluntary, electronics recycling program underway at the Agency. Much of our work is in partnership with the private sector. Here, in a nutshell, is why we've initiated the program, and what we're doing.

There are three basic reasons why we think it's important for EPA to engage in electronics recycling. First, we believe that if we use products efficiently, and extend their useful lives as long as possible, then we reduce the demand for new materials and manufacturing. At the same time, we reduce the adverse environmental effects associated with mining and manufacturing. So EPA is all for extending the useful life of electronic products.

By the way, it often happens that used computers and cell phones end up in the hands of people who can't afford to buy new ones. So there's a further social good involved in extending the life of electronics.

Second, EPA cares about electronic wastes because many of the materials contained in them have economic value after the product itself is

obsolete. Remember, one of the major laws we implement at EPA – the law that requires controls on landfills, for example – is RCRA, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act. As far back as 1976, when that law was enacted, Congress wanted EPA to help conserve and recover economically valuable materials. And that includes the materials contained in electronics.

Third, EPA cares about electronics because different kinds of pollution are generated when they're manufactured, used, and recycled. We want to see electronic products redesigned in ways that minimize those environmental effects – so the materials used in them are less toxic, so it takes less energy to run them, and so they can be taken apart and recycled more efficiently and more safely.

Those are the three main reasons why we're involved. And here, in a nutshell, is what we're doing.

First, we're encouraging the redesign of electronic products with the environment in mind. For example, we're launching a new tool that's designed to measure the environmental performance of new electronics. It's called the Electronics Environmental Assessment Tool, or EPEAT. EPEAT will allow large institutional purchasers to compare different products based on the toxicity of components, ease of dismantling, and other factors. We expect EPEAT to be finalized as an ANSI-accredited standard early this year.

Secondly, at EPA we believe that better environmental performance – whether in design, use, or disposal – should give products a leg up in the marketplace. So we're participating energetically in the Federal Electronics Challenge, which is using the purchasing power of the federal government to improve environmental performance. For example, Federal agencies are being challenged to use EPEAT when they purchase electronics. During this

past year, 81 federal facilities in twelve different agencies signed on to the Challenge. That's about 80 percent of federal electronics purchasing power, the total of which happens to be almost 60 billion dollars a year.

Third, EPA is also supporting electronics recycling by strengthening the recycling infrastructure in this country. For example, we're working with states, electronic recyclers, and manufacturers to create a certification program for electronics recyclers. We're also working with partners in the public and private sectors to support multi-state or regional recycling efforts. Finally, we're developing a better information base on how and to what extent electronics are being recycled in this country.

I wanted to give you this quick runthrough of EPA's major efforts in electronics recycling, because I'm not sure many people outside the electronics industry have heard about them. Press accounts usually emphasize electronics recycling in developing countries, where the dangers to workers and risks to the environment are often very serious.

But that's not usually the case in the United States. I had the opportunity to visit a domestic electronics recycling facility this past summer. And it looked to be cleaner than the EPA cafeteria.

My time is up, but I don't want to leave anybody with the impression that EPA is the only, or most important, organization working to reuse and recycle electronics. A dozen major manufacturing and retail companies have undertaken vigorous efforts, many of them through partnership with EPA. Tomorrow morning I'll be handing out awards to our corporate partners at the convention center. I invite you all to come and learn about the wide range of electronics recycling efforts underway in the United States.

Thank you.